

Meaning for Meaning: Applying The Theories of Dynamic Equivalence and Contextual Correspondence in Language Translation

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Abstract

The effectiveness of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence” as theories/approaches in language translation was tested in two translation contexts: (1) applying and testing the theories in translating scientific articles on food biotechnology, and (2) using the theories to analyze the cultural meanings of “storm surge” in the context of the super typhoon “Haiyan” (“Yolanda”). For the first translation context: three scientific articles on food biotechnology which were originally written in English, as Source Language (SL), were translated into Filipino, as Target Language (TL). Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to test and evaluate the translations, according to Larson (1984). Based on the results of the tests and evaluations, primarily involving comprehension tests administered among target readers, revisions as well as a final translation for each scientific article were made and a final reader comprehension test was administered. In the second test to analyze the effectiveness of the theories, the meanings of “storm surge” were analyzed in terms of scientific and cultural contexts. Texts/reports (both English and Filipino) were analyzed and interviews were conducted to assess various interpretations of meanings. This study proved that applying the theories of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence” in translating scientific articles and technical terms, is effective in targeting meaning-based translations. This further affirms that cultural translation leads to a higher level of comprehension among target readers/listeners.

Keywords: Translation, Dynamic Equivalence, Contextual Correspondence

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Introduction

“Translate or die!”-- powerful words by Paul Engle. This is how he sums up the “socially active, politically urgent cause of translation in the contemporary world” according to Edwin Gentzler (1993). To some, this may sound like an “academic expression” but it somehow had a literal meaning when the ferocious Typhoon “Haiyan,” local name, “Yolanda” hit full force the province of Leyte, Philippines in the early morning of November 8, 2013. According to various information sources, what the media generally termed as “storm surge” was not really understood by the local residents of the affected areas in these parts of Western, Visayas. Some reports said that the locals thought it was just one of those typhoons that usually visit their place every year. That there was no clear “translation into their language” of the kind of magnitude and strength Typhoon “Yolanda” had; and that part of the devastating aftermath is the depressive narrative in terms of “if only,” “could have,” “would have.” Sentiments such as: “Had there been a clearer description or translation into the local dialect of the intensity of “Yolanda,” there could have been better, more serious efforts for preparation or evacuation. To describe it as a “super typhoon,” “tropical cyclone,” or even like a “category 5 hurricane” does not quite capture the contextual or cultural meaning of the message as far as the local residents of Leyte are concerned. Once again, this reminds us that in the midst of global messaging, it is always important to find the local meaning.

Significance of the Study

In this research work, the primary aim was to test the effectiveness of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence,” as theories/approaches in language translation. Two translation areas/contextes were chosen: Food Biotechnology and Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda).

Food Biotechnology

Three scientific articles on food biotechnology originally written in English as Source Language (SL), were translated into Filipino as the Target Language (TL):

1.) *What You Should Know About Food Biotechnology*, 2.) *Food Biotechnology (Science and Farming Working Hand-in-Hand)*, and 3.) *Biotechnology: Solutions For Tomorrow's World*.

Biotechnology is one of the relatively “new sciences” in the Philippines. Particularly significant is the introduction of the Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) in the field of Agricultural Sciences. The Filipino farmers are the main targets of this “new technological information” specifically in terms of farming technology, practices and the use GM seeds, plants, etc. Big multinational agriculture-based corporations introducing new farming methods and plant seeds, with the promise of increased production and farming efficiency are the strong advocates for these new technologies. There may be a great advantage for learning new technologies, such as biotechnology, but the question is: Are the target receivers/recipients ready to learn, understand, and apply or use these new technologies?

Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)

The strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines, Typhoon Haiyan, local name: Yolanda, had a sustained wind speed at landfall at 195 miles per hour, wind gusts of up to 235 miles per hour, and surge in sea level during the storm at 13 feet high. All these technical descriptions pointed to a “storm surge,” a “tsunami,” a “tropical cyclone.” However, none of these terms or names deeply described to the locals the magnitude of this storm. They apparently had a “sense” of its “strength” but in terms of the contextual or cultural meaning – there seemed to have no dynamic equivalence to them, based on their personal experience, because it was not translated into their local language or dialect.

Importance of Language Translation

Language translation is obviously, extremely important for the transfer of information and exchanges in knowledge between and among cultures in the world. Since the beginning of human existence, language has been the main vehicle for communication. Living in a highly globalized society in the present times, challenges us to use the art and science of language translation, to help us make sense of what is happening in the different environments that we live in. Through language translation our diverse communities can come together in a universe of common meanings.

With all the different techniques and approaches in translation, the prevailing question is: What kind of translation would best “capture the meaning” of a message from SL to TL? It is important to remind ourselves that the whole purpose of translation - is communication...the transfer of meaning from one language to another.

Dynamic Equivalence

The theory of Dynamic Equivalence was first introduced by Eugene Nida (1964). This theory gives utmost importance to “response” or “reaction” of the receiver of the message in the TL and SL. For Nida, the reaction or response of the message receiver in the SL must be equivalent to the reaction or response of the message receiver in the TL. The overall impact of the message for both the receivers of the message in the SL and TL is very important. It is not enough that the message is understood. There must be an appropriate reaction for both the receivers in the SL and TL (Nida and Taber, 1969). According to Nida (1964), in language translation, it is important to reproduce the message; find the natural and closest meaningful equivalence; and prioritize the meaning of the message. These are more important than the grammatical form which he refers to as “formal correspondence.” Thus, the key features of Dynamic Equivalence include:

1. Finding the closest meaningful equivalence;
2. meaning of the message is more important than the structure of language;
3. “concept-for-concept” not “word-for-word;” and
4. audience/reader reaction or response is extremely essential.

Peter Newmark (1988) finds “dynamic equivalence” as a fine principle in translation. He refers to this as “equivalent effect.” However, he considers “equivalent effect” as a good result and not a goal in translation. He also believes that it is difficult to get “equivalent” results if there is a wide difference in the cultures involved in translation.

Moreover, he finds “equivalent effect” as an important intuitive principle that must be tested.

Contextual Correspondence

Contextual Correspondence is closely related to dynamic equivalence. According to this theory, finding the nearest contextual equivalence in the TL, is the main objective of translation. This often involves correspondence in cultural and situational contexts. The key features of this approach include:

1. Finding the meaning of the SL based on the context of the TL, i.e. what best matches its meaning; and
2. must include cultural and situational aspects

The Translation Process

Preparation

In any language translation, the most important part of preparation is reading and understanding the text of the SL. It is necessary for the translator to read the article or text several times to truly understand its content.

A. Analysis of the Text

Analysis of the text involves understanding the message of the SL and the culture that uses the particular language. Reading the SL text several times helps the translator to understand the message more clearly. Words which may be difficult to comprehend must be underlined and given a closer study. Determine if the particular text is informative, vocative, or expressive. Informative texts include knowledge, ideas, theories or factual events. Vocative texts call for readers to think, feel, react, decide, or act upon the objective of the text. Expressive texts involve expressions of emotions, typical of imaginative, literary texts such as poetry, short story, drama, novels, etc. Overall it is important to comprehend the meaning of the written text – the subject matter, the objective of the message, the “cultural meanings,” etc.

For this translation work, based on close analysis of these texts in Food Biotechnology, these are clearly classified as *informative*: 1.) *What You Should Know About Food Biotechnology*, 2.) *Food Biotechnology (Science and Farming Working Hand-in-Hand)*, and 3.) *Biotechnology: Solutions For Tomorrow’s World*. These texts contain basic information on Biotechnology, in general, and Food Biotechnology, in particular.

The term “storm surge” is a technical term for Typhoon Haiyan, with local name Typhoon Yolanda. The Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) used the term “storm surge” in their public announcements and warnings prior to the onslaught of the typhoon. It was also referred to as category 5 super typhoon.

B. Analysis of the Target Audience/Readers

To whom is the message intended? Who are the target readers? What are the demographic profiles in terms of: Age, education, gender, occupation, interests, economic status, and others?

The intended readers for the translation of the texts in Biotechnology were students, farmers, and professionals. Age group is 15-70 years old. Education is from elementary to post-graduate level; both males and females with varied interests, and from low-income to upper-middle income levels.

Actual Translation

In the actual translation process, the translator may want to use the different ways of finding the contextual, cultural equivalences between the SL and TL texts. The following are some of the ways:

1. Find the equivalent words or concepts in the TL and other languages/dialects spoken in that given culture.
2. Borrow from another language that is part of the cultural history of the TL. For example, in the Philippines, some Hispanic or Hispanized terms are still widely used and incorporated in the local dialects, e.g., SL: *biotechnology* TL: *bioteknolohiya*.
3. Borrow from English language, the terms which are commonly used in communication, e.g., SL: *molecule* TL: *molekyul*. Note that sometimes borrowing the word itself without changing the spelling is also acceptable.
4. Create new terms or words.

Other translation techniques may also be used, such as: Transposition, modulation, adaptation, descriptive equivalence or amplification, addition, subtraction, and others. Each translator, has his/her own style of making the actual translation. There is no specific formula to be followed for the actual task of translation. Some translators, make a first rough draft of the translation, then a second translation (revisions of the first draft), and a final polished copy. It is important to keep in mind that the essence of dynamic equivalence and contextual correspondence is “capturing the meaning” of the SL message in the TL. Cultural and social contexts play an important role in this translation approach. For example, when some agriculture scientists and farming technologists first introduced the concept of “conservation tillage” to the Filipino farmers, they have observed that these farmers did not quite understand the concept – until they tried to utilize the idea of “saving/budgeting” or “conservation” which is translated as “tipid” in Tagalog, and “tillage” which means “bungkal.” However, a combination of these Tagalog terms “tipid-bungkal” does not really capture the real meaning of “conservation tillage.” So when they used the term “saka” which means “farming” or “to farm” instead of “bungkal,” and they coined the term “tipid-saka” to translate the concept of “conservation tillage,” a better equivalence and contextual correspondence was found.

In the process of actual translation, making a “raw” translation of the SL text or first draft of translation is usually the beginning. Then a revision or editing is made until a final copy is completed.

Applying The Theories of Dynamic Equivalence and Contextual Correspondence

Translating Articles on Food Biotechnology

The articles translated contained basic information on biotechnology, specifically food biotechnology. These are semi-technical articles in the form of brochure, booklet, and review paper. The fundamental objective of the translations was to capture the meaning of the concepts based on cultural/contextual equivalence or correspondence in the TL. The following techniques/types of translation were utilized: Transcription, transliteration, borrowing, transposition, modulation, adaptation, and description. The entire translation process was guided by the essence of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence.” In order to capture the meaning of the message from SL to TL, it is important to consider the cultural/social practices of the people in TL.

Finding the Equivalence of “Storm Surge” (Typhoon Haiyan)

Storm surge is technically defined as a “rising of the sea as a result of wind and atmospheric pressure changes associated with a storm.” It is similar to “tsunami” in effect. In Tagalog language, according to Virgilio Almario, the term “daluyong” may be its equivalent meaning. However, to the people of Leyte and Tacloban, this term does not really capture the meaning of “storm surge.” So what could have been the best equivalent of the term “storm surge” based on the personal experience of the people in Leyte? According to many of them, if they were informed and warned that Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) was a much stronger version of “Typhoon Undang” (Typhoon Agnes) in 1984, they would have had a better idea/picture of the strength and magnitude of Typhoon Haiyan. This would have been a “dynamic equivalent” in meaning of this super typhoon. There could have been a much better preparedness for this super storm. Of course, there are other reasons that have made it more catastrophic – stubborn attitude of some people who did not want to listen and act upon the directives of the people in authority; inefficiencies in the government, lack of needed resources, etc. It is now a known fact that part of the tragic aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda was the realization that more could have been done in explaining to the public the magnitude and gravity of a storm surge. Translating the meaning of the term into the mother tongue or dialect such as Waray and Cebuano, and more importantly in the context of these people’s own personal experiences with previous typhoons, would have made a real big difference.

Testing the Translation

Testing the translation is a very important part of the whole process of translation. According to Mildred Larson (1984), translation evaluations help determine the effectiveness of the translation made. Three kinds of test need to be done:

1. Test of Comprehension – ask the target reader to read the translation and explain its meaning.
2. Test of Readability – ask the target reader to read the translation silently at first, then ask to read it aloud afterwards. Check if the reader has difficulty in reading certain words or if there are hesitations or unusual pauses.

3. Test of Naturalness (easy flow of communication) – ask a professional translator to check if the translation communicated the message with ease and that it follows an appropriate style of translation.

When these tests were applied to the translations made for the abovementioned articles in Biotechnology, the effectiveness of applying the theories of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence” were proven.

Conclusion

Meanings are always in people, and therefore, personal or cultural. Applying the theories of “dynamic equivalence” and “contextual correspondence” are effective approaches in the art and science of translation.

Translation is not only the “transfer of meaning” through the use of language. It is a task that includes an intimate consideration of culture and an entire way of life. It may be a difficult process...but it is always worth the effort...because it could mean saving and improving the lives of people.

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